DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 231 UD 030 134

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TITLE The Urban Learner Framework: An Overview.

INSTITUTION Research for Better Schools, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.

SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Aug 94
CONTRACT RP91002004
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ability; Administration; Cooperation; Cultural Differences; Curriculum Development; *Decision Making; Educational Change; Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Learning Theories; Models; Motivation; *School Restructuring; *Student Characteristics; Student Motivation; Urban Schools; Urban Youth
IDENTIFIERS Reform Efforts; Research for Better Schools Incorporated; *Resilience (Personality); *Urban Learner Framework

ABSTRACT

The Urban Education staff at Research for Better Schools (RBS), Inc., has developed a conceptual framework to address the complex issues that must be dealt with in urban school-restructuring efforts. This overview of the Urban Learner Framework (ULF) describes its two major features: four research-based themes that are the foundation for a new vision of the urban learner and the ramifications of these themes for decision-making within functional areas of school organization. The four themes are: (1) cultural diversity and learning; (2) unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential; (3) enhancement of ability development through motivation and effort; and (4) resilience of urban learners. Integration of knowledge and meaning across these themes leads to a new vision of urban learners that focuses on their strengths. The second major feature of the ULF is a set of decision-making guidelines that begins with determining an appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment and then designing effective staff-development programs. Establishing a supportive school environment and building visionary leadership and effective management are other decision-making guideline topics. A list of RBS activities and products is included. (Contains 42 references.) (SLD)

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AN INTERVIEW

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ABOUT RESEARCH FOR BETTER SCHOOLS AND THE URBAN EDUCATION PROJECT

Research for Better Schools (RBS), a private, non-profit, educational research and development firm has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education since 1966 to serve as the educational laboratory for the Mid-Atlantic region. Using the expertise of some 60 staff members, RBS conducts research and policy studies of key educational issues, develops improvement approaches, and participates in national networking activities with other regional laboratories to enhance the use of research and development products and knowledge.

The present mission of the RBS Urban Education Project builds upon past experience. The Project seeks to initiate and support efforts to improve and restructure schooling in urban districts. Emphasis is placed on helping urban educators meet the diverse needs of students by developing an integrated knowledge base which incorporates and disseminates the most current, promising, and pertinent research. ***The Urban Learner Framework: An Overview*** summarizes the knowledge base and presents a decisionmaking framework designed to guide the restructuring of urban schools.

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THE URBAN LEARNER FRAMEWORK: AN OVERVIEW

August, 1994

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THE URBAN LEARNER FRAMEWORK: AN OVERVIEW

A large gap between the academic performance of most majority culture students and poor urban children continues to exist in the 1990s despite numerous school reform efforts across the country. The failure to educate a significant number of children in marginalized populations living in poor, urban areas may be due to current and past practices (e.g., traditional, formal curricula; focus on dominant cultural values; emphasis on linguistic and mathematical intelligences) and policies (e.g., tracking, norm-referenced testing). In addition, some researchers are convinced that available restructuring designs and national reform proposals **do not** adequately address the unique issues and conditions facing urban schools (Fullan, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Lytle, 1992; Newmann, 1993; Olsen et al., 1994); therefore, they fail to substantially impact the achievement problems of large numbers of poor urban students. The outcome is that many students do not have an equal opportunity to learn. This limits their ability to become competitive in America's economy and to participate in democratic institutions.

The Urban Education staff at Research for Better Schools (RBS) have developed a conceptual framework which specifically addresses the complex issues that must be dealt with in urban restructuring efforts. This overview of our Urban Learner Framework (ULF) describes its two major features: (1) four research-based themes which serve as the foundation for a new vision of the urban learner, and (2) the ramifications of the research-based themes for decision-making within the functional areas of school organization.

Research-Based Themes

Recent theories of intelligence, learning, and instruction reject conceptions of urban learners as culturally-deprived, lacking in ability, unmotivated, and at-risk. Instead these theories suggest there are four research-based themes which, taken together, generate a vision of urban learners as culturally-diverse, capable, motivated, and resilient. The following sections provide an overview of the four research-based themes which support this new vision of the urban learner, and which also comprise the knowledge upon which the ULF (see Figure 1) is based.

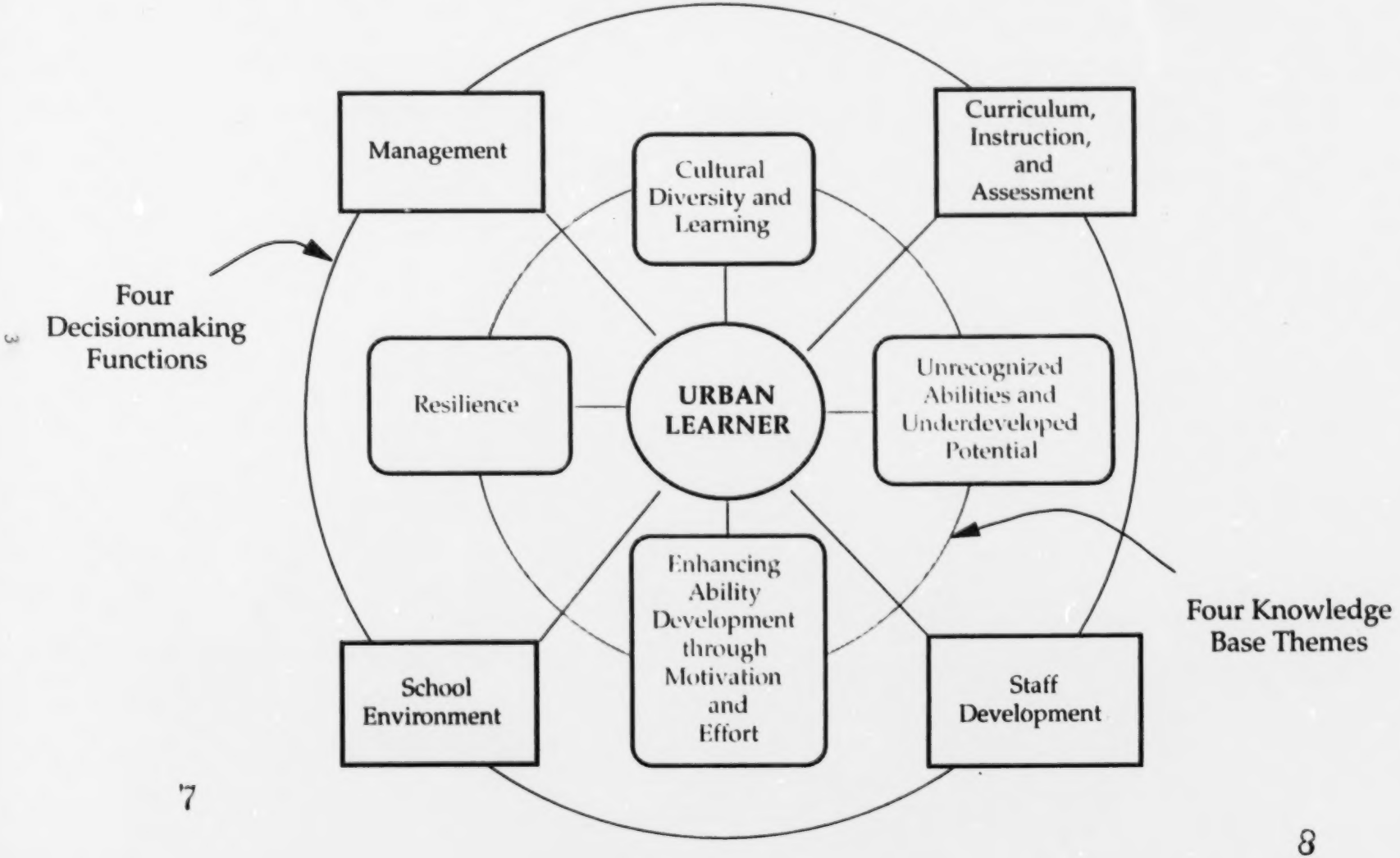
Cultural Diversity and Learning

All children bring specific cultural knowledge, experiences, and strengths with them to school. However, currently there is a mismatch between the instruction and curriculum in many schools and the cultural experiences and strengths of urban students. The new vision of the urban learner that is contained within the ULF addresses this mismatch. The ULF suggests that teachers connect with learner's experiences and challenge them with relevant instructional materials in order to facilitate learning and intellectual and cognitive growth (Prawat, 1993; Knapp et al., 1993), and thereby fully develop each child (Vygotsky, 1978).

In other words, this first theme of the ULF asks educators to value and access urban learners' cultures, unique social experiences, and operant verbal and behavioral skills, and to weave these essential elements into instructional activities within the formal curriculum. Numerous research studies and school programs highlight the importance of teachers being sensitive to students' diverse cultural backgrounds and social experiences as a basis for learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Villegas, 1991). This sensitivity activates teachers to think

Figure 1

URBAN LEARNER FRAMEWORK



strategically about urban learners' differing strengths and needs, especially in the teaching/learning process. Teachers' knowledge of students' differences help them to better understand the diverse ways in which urban learners interact with subject matter and become engaged with important concepts and approaches. Thus, this theme suggests that urban learners will achieve greater academic success if their cultural backgrounds and unique experiences are connected with the curriculum.

The theme also suggests that staff development should prepare teachers to work with students from diverse subcultures, and prepare school administrators to collaborate with parent groups and community agencies to ensure student learning and growth. In so doing, a school environment can be created in which each learner's cultural identity is valued and used as one basis for instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1990; Tharp, 1989, 1993). In sum, each educator's understanding and appreciation of urban learners' cultures, and integration of them into the formal curriculum, becomes the linchpin for successful instruction of urban learners.

This emphasis on culture in the ULF is grounded in anthropological, sociological, and psychological theory which highlights the fundamental role that culture plays in all human development. Culture refers to a group's values, knowledge, traditions, verbal styles, linguistic and interaction patterns, and distinct behavioral strategies. Culture is shared by members of a group (e.g., racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, religious) and learned by children through everyday social interaction and talk with peers and adults (Cosaro & Eder, 1994).

Unrecognized Abilities and Underdeveloped Potential

The second theme focuses on enhancing educators' capacity to recognize the specific abilities that enable all children to survive --- and even thrive --- in both the majority culture

and the inner city. Each child possesses a different combination of natural talents including musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences (Gardner, 1983). These talents have a biological base, but they are also strongly shaped by specific cultural contexts. As Gardner notes, "language, a universal skill, may manifest itself particularly as writing in one culture, as oratory in another culture, and as the secret language of anagrams in a third" (1993, p. 16).

In America's schools today, most curricula, classroom instruction, and student assessments reflect a bias of the dominant culture which emphasizes linguistic and mathematical skills as the major abilities to be developed. In addition to these abilities, this theme recognizes and advocates other cultural strengths and abilities that many urban learners exhibit, such as leadership, confidence, persistence, practicality, artistry, imagination, humor, visualization, a sense of community, and expressive verbal skills (Baytops, 1992). Bernal (1993) argues that addressing these characteristics might be an effective approach to teaching urban students. Thus, teachers, administrators, and school settings might emphasize such factors and blend them with "realistic, relevant curricula that introduces academic rigor" (p. 16).

Along these lines, a curriculum that includes cooperative or team learning provides the foundation for emotional enthusiasm -- even celebration -- of intellectual accomplishments. Still another hidden talent of many urban learners is their sense of practicality, a commitment to acting on what is real. Bernal (1993, p. 15) notes urban learners are "understandably concerned with the reality that they must survive every day. Accordingly, education must address these practical matters if it ever hopes to engage these youngsters routinely in more abstract, less immediate exercises of cognitive ability. Alternatively, educators must demonstrate how what they wish to teach has real life application to urban youth."

Cognitive research suggests that intelligence is modifiable and not fixed (Feuerstein, 1980; 1985). Research indicates that traditional tests of intelligence are inadequate predictors of success in life and work after formal schooling (Jencks et al., 1972; Sternberg, 1985; Peters, 1988). Thus, the multiple intelligences of all learners can be developed throughout a lifetime. In addition, recent research and cognitive theory suggests that intelligence is malleable and multifaceted, and includes more than verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical capacities (Feuerstein, 1990; Gardner 1983, 1993). Specifically, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences: "pluralizes the traditional concept [of intelligence]. An intelligence entails the ability to solve problems or fashion products that are of consequence in a particular cultural setting. The problem-solving skill allows one to approach a situation in which a goal is to be obtained and to locate the appropriate route to that goal. The creation of a **cultural** product is crucial to such functions as capturing and transmitting knowledge or expressing one's views or feelings" (Gardner, 1993, p. 15). In short, this theme maintains that educators who recognize, nurture, and reward children's strengths and varied intelligences will ultimately help them realize their full potential.

Enhancing Ability Development Through Motivation and Effort

Many educators harbor beliefs that emphasize the role of innate ability in achievement. In urban schools, this often means that students' errors are interpreted as an indication of inability rather than opportunities for further learning. Thus, urban learners' potential to learn all too often goes undeveloped. Consequently, their motivation and school effort also wane.

Research indicates that motivation plays a critical role in the learning process (Ames, 1992). Specifically, students' intrinsic motivation increases when they find their academic work to be personally relevant. In addition, learners are more likely to achieve when they express

positive self-concepts, display high levels of self-efficacy and self-regulation, and have goals of understanding rather than performing (Alexander & Murphy, 1994).

This third theme suggests that teachers should create classroom environments in which students learn from their errors and effort is rewarded. Recent research on other cultures (e.g., Japan, South Korea) indicates that high academic achievement is supported by the belief that ability increases under positive, supportive conditions, such as teachers having high expectations for all students, believing in effort, and recognizing that students learn through different experiences (Lee, 1992; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Along this same line, teachers in this country could provide more opportunities for students to learn from their errors and to be rewarded for their efforts by promoting the use of group problem-solving activities and project-focused tasks (Maehr & Midgley, 1991).

In summary, this theme suggests, in concert with the two previous themes, that urban learners' natural motivation and effort can be activated and increased by educators who recognize and value learners' special strengths and abilities, connect these cultural elements to the curriculum in meaningful ways, provide abundant opportunities for students to learn from their errors, and provide rich rewards for meaningful effort.

Resilience

The fourth theme focuses on resilience, which refers to urban learners' energy and their strategies for overcoming adversity. Resilience is fostered when educators provide urban learners with caring, challenging, and meaningful classroom experiences that support children's intrinsic motivation in school and enhance their resistance to the dangers of the inner city such as gangs, violence, and the use of illegal drugs. Resilience operates as a coping strategy, or protective mechanism, which facilitates a healthy response to risk situations which occur at

crucial times during one's life (Rutter, 1987). For example, as Winfield (1991) notes: "A student's decision to remain in school when he or she sees few job opportunities, receives no support or incentives, and experiences negative peer pressure would be an example of an individual's resilience during a critical transition to adulthood. This decision would determine the trajectory of future educational success" (p. 7).

Recent research shows that many urban learners are competent, responsible, productive, and healthy individuals (Winfield, 1991). However, learners in urban areas, particularly, are in the precarious position of suffering daily from dangerous forces beyond their control. This theme suggests that schools that adopt the new view of the urban learner will create classroom conditions that increase the resiliency of more urban children. Research findings show that students develop resilience in school from caring and supportive teachers and from an accelerated curriculum built on high expectations (Benard, 1991). Under these conditions, protective mechanisms can be developed that reduce the impact of risk, alter the "deficit" mentality and negative labeling, raise students self-efficacy and self-esteem, and open new opportunities for learning. As Winfield (1993) notes, this alternative approach is an investment in their potential.

In the end, it should be noted that there is much overlap and many interconnections among these four research-based themes. Integration of knowledge and meaning across the themes leads to a new vision of urban learners. This new vision of the urban learner focuses on urban children's cultural backgrounds, their unique strengths and talents, and the importance of tapping into their intrinsic motivation and effort, which, taken together, fosters their resilience and likelihood of leading productive, successful lives.

Decisionmaking Within Functional Areas

The second major feature of the Urban Learner Framework is a set of decisionmaking guidelines to aid educators in their efforts to use the ULF knowledge base in moving toward systemic change. Every day, urban educators at all levels make decisions in each of four functional areas of school organization: (1) determining appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (2) designing effective staff development programs; (3) establishing a supportive school environment; and (4) building visionary leadership and effective management. These decisions should be reviewed through the lens and informed by the research-based knowledge and unique vision of the urban learner incorporated in the Urban Learner Framework. Information from the four themes of the new vision can also help urban educators conduct needs assessments and prioritize strategies in each of these four important functional areas.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Curriculum and instruction make schooling more meaningful and engaging for urban students when tied to their real cultural experiences and personally-held values (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales, 1992). Such relevant curriculum and instruction identifies authentic tasks in the curriculum (Jones, 1993) and facilitates the development of students' abilities and the knowledge relevant to their lives and the needs of society (Cohen, 1992). The assessment of learning in such curriculum and instruction requires measures that are broader and deeper than most standardized paper-and-pencil tests. The assessment of performances, projects, and portfolios are examples of such measures. Used wisely by teachers, these alternative forms of assessment can elicit hidden talents (Lomax, West, Harmon, Viator, & Madaus, 1992) and more

accurately reflect the broad range of curriculum and instruction experienced by the students (Jones, 1993).

Staff Development

Expanding awareness, understanding, and valuing, and engaging culturally different students in authentic learning calls for new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving for educators in a school system. Staff development programs ought to serve as catalysts for cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes in teachers. Specifically, since research indicates that teachers' beliefs play a central role in their everyday practice (Pajares, 1992), progressive programs must facilitate greater awareness and valuing of culturally different students by teachers. In addition to the traditional core component of staff development (basic skills, content, and academics), programs consistent with the new vision need to include elements that stress the role of the classroom educator as a "guide" who understands how students learn at different stages of development and employs effective strategies to elicit and nurture their learning (Jackson, 1992, p. 37). From this perspective, staff development needs to imbue teachers with the feeling that they are part of a "community of learners;" teachers need to become mediators and collaborators who constantly learn about their students' cultural backgrounds and support the development of every student's particular abilities (Ayers, 1993; Moll, et al., 1992).

School Environment

School environments that reflect the ULF knowledge base are ones that have high expectations, a challenging curriculum, and valued activities and roles for students. Adults exhibit caring, support, and concern for building positive student self-esteem. They are focused

on developing individual potential and promoting growth, a sense of future, and success for every student. Similarly, the environment beyond the school itself, which includes families, the community, local school district administration, state and federal agencies, legislators, and other stakeholders, needs to be organized to promote every youngster's growth and learning.

Management

Leadership that supports shared, decentralized decisionmaking will help staff focus on the backgrounds, strengths, and experiences of urban learners. Management strategies that include collaboration with community agencies and enhancing the home environment will also help to bolster student growth and learning (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). In these multiple ways, educators in the inner city should strive to develop more fully their students' abilities and academic potential.

In conclusion, the Urban Learner Framework suggests a number of connections among the four knowledge themes that comprise the new vision of the urban learner and the type of decisions which will lead to needed changes within each of the four functional areas of school organization. One can see that the framework calls for systemic change in urban education. Focusing attention on either the process of organizational change (e.g., decentralization, shared decisionmaking, collaboration) or the pedagogy of instruction (e.g., higher order thinking skills instruction, technology, curriculum integration) is not sufficient to produce changed student outcomes. What is required is the systemic application of integrated knowledge bases, such as those in the ULF, to decisions across major functional areas of the school. It indicates that, in the end, educational reform must be fully systemic and requires the collective, focused, and creative energy of educators, researchers, legislators, and leaders (Conley, 1993; Fullan, 1992).

Along these lines, Belinda Williams, Director of the Urban Education Project at RBS, notes: "There must be a way of reaching consensus around the new vision of the urban learner so that the curriculum reflects it, staff development addresses it at the district and the school levels, leadership manages it, state education agencies establish and monitor regulations consistent with it, and federal funds support the effort. You can't have a school or district doing one thing, the state holding it accountable for something else, and the federal government funding something completely different" (Williams, quoted in Spray, 1992, p. 2).

Williams and the RBS Urban Education staff are working to implement the framework at several of these levels. They are currently working with schools in Camden, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C. to develop and test strategies that move teachers and administrators through various levels of understanding (awareness, commitment, ownership) of the new vision. Through these efforts, the Urban Education staff are continuing to gain a broader understanding of how to put sound theory and research into tools to inform practice in the interests of the urban learner. This information is being disseminated to educators and the academic research community through presentations at professional conferences, articles in newsletters and journals, and new products being developed by the staff.

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RBS URBAN EDUCATION PROJECT
LIST OF ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTS

ACTIVITIES

- Collaboration with central office and building-level educators in Baltimore, Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C. and small urban districts in the region.
- Development of an agenda of activities for districts to introduce the Urban Learner Framework (ULF) to administrators, teachers, parents, and community representatives (e.g., participation at regularly scheduled meetings of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) Center for Systemic Educational Change Board of Directors).
- Collaboration with state agencies (e.g., the Pennsylvania Department of Education Office of School Equity; New Jersey Office of Urban Education) to introduce the ULF to state and district decisionmakers.
- Participation on a regular basis with the New Jersey Urban Superintendents (NJUS) at their regularly scheduled meetings.
- Provision of training sessions and workshops on the ULF themes in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., Camden, and Chester-Upland (e.g., 10-week graduate course in Washington, D.C.: "The New Vision of the Urban Learner: From Theory to Practice").
- Development of products to disseminate the ULF and to assist districts with educational change and improvement (see below).
- Provision of seminars to disseminate current research and theory to educators in the region.
- Collection of ethnographic data on urban learners' experiences.

PRODUCTS

Urban Education Project. (forthcoming). ***A guide for integrating urban learner's experiences in instructional strategies.*** Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools.

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These materials are based on work sponsored, wholly or in part, by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), United States Department of Education under Contract Number RP91002004. The content of these materials does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

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